

Imitating the Grammar of the Greats

Why are the sentences of great authors more interesting, more memorable than the sentences of most people? One big reason is that their sentences are not monotonously alike. A huge difference is the ways those authors build their sentences. The purpose of this worktext is to teach those ways by focusing on the grammatical tools of great authors to build better sentences.

Look at the varied ways these ten sentences are built, all by William Golding, author of the novel *Lord of the Flies*. No two are built the same.

1. He stood knee-deep in the central grass, looking at his hidden feet, trying to pretend that he was in a tent.
2. Half-relieved, half-daunted by the implication of further terrors, the savages murmured again.
3. Percival was mouse-colored and had not been very attractive even to his mother; Johnny was well-built, with fair hair and a natural belligerence.
4. In front of them, only three or four yards away, was a rock-like hump where no rock should be.
5. There was a small pool at the end of the river, dammed back by sand and full of white water-lilies and needle-like reeds.
6. Evening was advancing toward the island; the sounds of the bright fantastic birds, the bee-sounds, even the crying of the gulls that were returning to their roosts among the square rocks, were fainter.
7. He was old enough, twelve years and a few months, to have lost the prominent tummy of childhood, and not yet old enough for adolescence to have made him awkward.
8. Here—and his hands touched grass—was a place to be in for the night, not far from the tribe, so that if the horrors of the supernatural emerged one could at least mix with humans for the time being.
9. The flame, invisible at first in that bright sunlight, enveloped a small twig, grew, was enriched with color, and reached up to a branch, which exploded with a sharp crack.
10. If there was no beast—and almost certainly there was no beast—well and good; but if there was something waiting on top of the mountain, what was the use of three of them, handicapped by the darkness and carrying only sticks?

In the pages of this worktext, you will analyze, study, and then imitate the sentences of many authors whose books are often read by high school students—

Chunking to Imitate

In these exercises you will become aware of meaningful divisions within sentences, an awareness you'll need to imitate model sentences. You will learn that authors compose their sentences one "chunk" or meaningful sentence part at a time.

Directions (Part One): Copy the sentence divided into meaningful chunks.

- 1a. She made stuffed pork chops / with applesauce and mashed potatoes / and it tasted / like cardboard.
- 1b. She made stuffed / pork chops with applesauce and mashed / potatoes and it tasted like / cardboard.

Frank McCourt, *Teacher Man*

- 2a. The family was grouped by / the front door the / mother's hands resting on her / children's shoulders.
- 2b. The family was grouped by the front door / the mother's hands resting / on her children's shoulders.

Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*

- 3a. For more than a / century the big business of / Gravesend was lumber, which / was the first big business of New / Hampshire.
- 3b. For more than a century / the big business of Gravesend / was lumber, / which was / the first big business / of New Hampshire.

John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

Directions (Part Two): Copy the model and then copy the sentence that can be divided into chunks that match the chunks in the model.

1. MODEL: Outside, I found a taxi for her.

Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*

- a. Slowly, the cat jumped and landed quietly.
- b. Nearby, Akeelah had a dictionary in hand.

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2. MODEL: The man toppled to one side, crumpled against the railing, dead.

Robert Ludlum, *The Prometheus Deception*

- a. The car, swerving to avoid the child, hit a guardrail, loudly.
- b. The winner jumped from her seat, overwhelmed by the applause, joyous.

3. MODEL: He turned slowly and stood a moment longer, a faceless silhouette against the light.

Morris West, *The Clowns of God*

- a. Morris spoke quickly and complained a while longer, a disgruntled customer in the manager's office.
- b. Beautifully, Clara sang, winning first place in the contest, her competitors not even close to her talent.

Directions (Part Three): Copy the model and then copy the sentence that imitates it. Then chunk both into the same sentence parts, using slash marks (/).

1. MODEL: It was dark when I got up in the morning, frosty when I followed my breath to school.

Julia Alvarez, "Snow"

- a. It was early when the bus came by from the school, late when it returned the children to their homes.
- b. It was a fine car, shiny with chrome and paint and sleek in shape, a red convertible designed to have a retro look from the 1950s.

2. MODEL: She wore her coarse, straight hair, which was slightly streaked with gray, in a long braided rope across the top of her head.

Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

- a. They played the grueling, championship matches, which were completely unpredictable by forecasters, with an amazing energy from the weakest players to the strongest.
- b. The arrangement, beautiful, freshly picked from the garden, smelled of a combination of lilies, sage, and magnolia.

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In the following activities, you'll build your sentences like those by authors through imitating their sentence structure but using your own content. To think of what to write, first think of interesting content, maybe a situation or character from a book, movie, TV show, or news event—or use your imagination to create original content.

Directions (Part Four): Match the model and its imitation. Copy both sentences. Then chunk both, using a slash (/) between sentence parts. Finally, write your own imitation of each model.

1. MODEL: The elephant was dying, in great agony, very slowly.

George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant"

2. MODEL: In the back room of the laboratory, the white rats in their cages ran and skittered and squeaked.

John Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*

IMITATIONS

- a. Near the old barn by the railroad tracks, the stray cat foraged and lived and slept.
b. The sunset was happening, in silent splendor, quite colorfully.